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Students' Perceptions of Teachers' Teaching and Interactions with Students: Voices from a Tsunami Affected School in Banda Aceh

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Abstract

Casualties and physical destruction of the 2004 tsunami in Aceh are well documented in the literature. However, little is known about lives of teachers and students after the tragedy, particularly about the teaching and learning including teacher-student instructional relationships at the affected schools in the province. This cross-sectional qualitative case study, which was conducted between April and October 2010 at a public junior high school in Banda Aceh that was severely affected by the Aceh 2004 tsunami, provided evidences that the tragedy affected the quality of teachers' teaching and teacher-student relationships. Data were obtained from semi-structured interviews with ten students from the school, supported by data collection observations over a period of six months. In general, the students commented about their teachers in negative terms. This included students' deficit views about teachers' lack of commitment on their teaching practice and their poor interactions with students at the school, affecting the quality of students' learning at the school.

Keywords: Effective teaching, student learning, instructional relationship, Aceh, tsunami.

1. INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the 2004 tsunami in Aceh. However, little has been found in the literature about the impact of the natural disaster on schools, particularly on the life of teachers and students at schools within the affected community. Previous research on disasters worldwide whether quantitative or qualitative, including studies related to the tsunami in Aceh even when done in school setting, has focused more on psychological aspects of the disaster impact. Among these are a study on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among students survivors in Aceh (Agustini et al., 2011),

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research identifying resilience among Aceh tsunami affected children (Hestyanti, 2006) and a study on psychopathology examining the effect of exposure and post-disaster changes in life circumstances (Irmansyah et al., 2010).

Research provides evidence that in addition to casualties and damage of property, disasters often result in significant post disaster problems (Freedy et al., 1992; Leon, 2004; Lindell, 2011) that are far beyond the loss of possessions and infrastructure destruction (Silove & Zwi, 2005). More specifically, students in schools who have been exposed to traumatic events may have had their performance in class impeded (Cole et al., 2005). In this case, students with behaviour issues due to stress, trauma or problems at homes as a result of the experience of traumatic event like the tsunami may experience rejection by teachers and peers and even their caregivers because of their difficult behaviours, reducing the opportunities for positive social engagement, classroom participation and supportive instruction and feedback (Harris et al., 2004).

In the life and development of many young children, teachers occupy important roles (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Wolmer et al., 2005). Due to the significant amount of time children spend with their teachers at school and their perceived role in the community, it is possible for teachers to have a strong influence in children's lives (Russo & Boman, 2007). Although only a minority of studies has explored the role of teachers as "protective buffers" in the lives of children who face great adversity, the role of teachers in helping children cope and develop resilience is critical (Benard, 1991). In the life of children affected by traumatic events, a teacher's role is even more vital. Teachers may help students understand situations that are beyond their comprehension and control (G. L. Bowen et al., 1998). This includes providing students with positive and supportive school and classroom environments including promoting positive classroom interactions and having positive and high expectations of students' achievement (Benard, 1991; G. L. Bowen et al., 1998).

As adults, it is necessary that teachers understand children's emotional reactions and respond to them in appropriate ways (Mandel et al., 2006). In addition, teacher should create a stable and supportive environment in which children can be full participants in their school communities (Cole et al., 2005). However, many teachers in Aceh are the survivors or the witnesses of the tsunami themselves and may also have lost much in the tragedy including loved ones and property. In addition, teachers' experience of the tragedy is likely to have had an impact on their lives and roles as educators. In addition, many people including teachers in Aceh may have lacked natural disaster related knowledge and were not aware of the possible vulnerability hazards caused by the disaster (Khairuddin et al., 2009). As a result, teachers in Aceh may have limitations in performing their job at school and in providing support for those in needs such as students affected by the tsunami. Moreover, students exposed to disasters like the tsunami may experience difficulties in their learning and working with those students could be challenging for teachers.

The study that I conducted over a period of six months of data collection in one public junior high school severely affected by the tsunami in Banda Aceh whose primary aims were to better understand the challenges and needs for teachers and students at tsunami affected schools in Aceh, and to provide evidences that teachers and students in the school were facing challenges in their teaching and learning at the time of the study. Specifically, this paper provides findings from my communications with students in the study school, particularly findings related to students' views of teachers' pedagogical practice and teacher-student relationships at the school. To the best of my

knowledge, there has been no research that looks at the teaching and learning in tsunami affected schools in Aceh that also include children as sources of data. The findings of this study offer a starting point to open doors for further and more specific research in the field, and bridge the gap in the literature for better understanding issues faced by teachers and students in disaster affected schools.

2. METHODS

This study is a cross-sectional qualitative case study. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews with 10 third-grade (year 9) students who were purposively selected, and is supported by observations in the study school to gain insights into the students' views about their teachers. The ten students experienced and were affected by the tsunami tragedy. They survive the tsunami and many lost one or both parents in the tragedy.

Since little was known about the topic under study and considering its complexity, I asked broad questions and the participants' responses were the sources of the follow-up questions and led the rest of the discussion during the interview rather than to strictly delimit the interviews to predetermined questions (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Punch, 2005; Rapley, 2004). For example, I asked "Can you please tell me about yourself?", "What could be the challenges for you in learning?", or "What do you like or dislike about your school?". The interviews were conducted in Indonesian and/or the Acehnese language depending on the situation. To help me maintain the focus and the interaction during the interview, a list of questions to be asked were prepared initially.

In interviews with students, I wanted to hear the young people's interpretations and thoughts about the topic being investigated (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). With this in mind, I attempted to treat the young people in such a way that would enable them to feel comfortable to participate, comment, initiate questions, and show their concerns about the topic discussed during the interviews (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). Before each interview commenced, I asked the students about how they preferred to be interviewed. In other words, the students were given a choice to either participate in private in the absence of others, in a group interview or with a companion, depending on each individual's preference. After each interview, I asked every student what they thought about the interview they had just had and made sure that I was available for them to discuss any issues resulting from the interviews. Each of them said that they did not have any problems with the interviews.

In general, interviews with each student took around 20-30 minutes. All student interviews were conducted in the school laboratory, which most of the time was unoccupied, at the time they preferred and with the school's approval.

In analysing the students' interviews, I firstly listened to interviews several times and then transcribed them, read and re-read the transcripts to familiarise myself with the data. The data were coded, conceptualised, and then organised in the form of issues to report (Douglas, 2003). I used a constant comparison method (Bowen, 2008; Lindlof, 1995) with the aim to look for commonalities and differences on the central issue to report as findings (Dye et al., 2000). In this paper, I have translated my findings and used extensive quotes from participants to fully represent their perceptions (Bailey & Jackson, 2003).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From my informal conversations with teachers and students during the data collection period, I understood that factors that contributed to young people's learning at the study school after the tsunami were complex. I had heard a lot of negative talks about students including their learning in the school. Teachers commented that after the tsunami, teachers' commitment in teaching was low while students were not motivated in learning. More specifically, teachers perceived students as different from those before the tsunami in terms of their behaviour and attitude. Students after the tsunami were seen as naughty. From my communications with teachers, the absence of parents (i. e. death of parents in the tsunami) could be one of the factors contributing to students' misbehaviour problems. In light of this, teachers found it more difficult to perform their role due to students' behavioural issues. On the other hand, interestingly, one of the contributing factors indicated by students in interviews was their teachers. Students' views of their teachers were also in negative terms.

3.1 Teacher Pedagogical Practice

In interviews with students based on observational data I asked young people's opinions about the cause of students' lack of engagement with the lessons in classrooms. The common responses included that the teachers' teaching was not interesting and engaging. According to many students, teachers generally only wrote the lesson for them to copy or simply lectured and the way they taught was difficult to understand. In addition, some students mentioned that many teachers arrived at the class late and often left the class unattended during the lesson allowing students to engage in off-task activities including misbehaving, which in the end put them in trouble. One student critically commented:

"They asked students to write from the textbooks and then they left the class. They just sit over there. How can we not make noise when there is no teacher in class? If they are in the class, it is impossible to be noisy or go in and out of the classroom as we like".

When I challenged one student in the interview as to whether teachers in the school had put every effort to teach well so students could learn well, the student believed that:

"Teachers effort in teaching was yet to be maximal".

In the interview, I also intended to find out what students expected from their teacher in terms of teaching so that they could learn better. Although students found it difficult to articulate, they in general expected teachers to deliver their lessons in a way that was easy for students to understand, teach in a fun way with some humour so students would not be bored or explain the lesson first to students until they understand it and be willing to repeat if students do not understand. Indeed, students mentioned some teachers whom they liked because their teaching was seen as interesting and easy to understand. One particular student mentioned group work or discussion as useful and helpful to help him learn better at school. The student noted that:

“Group work gives me the opportunity to discuss the lesson that I do not understand with other students who understand it”.

Research suggests that quality teaching involves teachers' ability to create classroom environments that encourage an effective learning atmosphere (Shulman, 2006, p. 65; Stoll, 1992) asserted that “effective teaching deals with creating classrooms as places with a minimum of disruption and distraction where learners can attend to instructional tasks, orient themselves toward learning and receive a fair and adequate opportunity to learn”. Learning becomes more enjoyable when students perceive their classroom and its environment as encouraging their participation in the process of that learning (Ames & Archer, 1988). In other words, there is a strong positive correlation between the perceived learning environment and students' social, emotional, and academic achievement (Frenzel et al., 2007).

Frenzel et al. (2007) noted that the classroom learning environment is not only about the physical objects or space such as school buildings or classrooms and materials needed for learning, but includes the teaching learning processes such as instructional and interactional processes between and among students and teachers. Similarly, Glaser-Zikuda et al. (2005) believed that teachers' instructional quality, students' achievement and enjoyment, and social interaction are positively related to well-being in school. In the light of this, Frenzel et al. (2007) argued that teachers' clear and structured instruction and their own behaviour can reduce learners' anxiety, anger, and boredom and thus enhance enjoyment, which in turn enhances their achievement. Glaser-Zikuda et al. (2005) suggested that emotions including anxiety, anger, hopelessness, boredom, interest or enjoyment in learning are correlated to learning and achievement as they are related to learners' attention, self-regulation and motivation that attract or distract them from their learning. In this sense, positive emotions mediated by attention, self-regulation, and motivation promote quality learning and achievement (Glaser-Zikuda et al., 2005).

Research suggests that how students learn very much depends on their teachers (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Meanwhile, what teachers do in classrooms depends upon their knowledge of pedagogy, acquired primarily through their practical experiences in the classroom (Bassey, 1999; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, p. 492) claimed:

...competent teachers set the tone of the classroom by developing and encouraging relationships with their students, designing lessons that build on student strengths and abilities, establishing and implementing behavioural guidelines in ways that promote intrinsic motivation, coaching students through conflict situations, encouraging cooperation among students, and acting as a role model for respectful and appropriate communication and exhibitions of pro-social behaviour (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, p. 492).

Jennings and Greenberg (2009) continued to say that teachers who have skills and resources to effectively manage their classrooms' social and emotional challenges promote an optimal classroom climate. This is indicated by low levels of conflict and disruptive behaviour, smooth transitions between classroom activities, appropriate expressions of emotions, respectful communication and problem solving, strong interest

and focus on tasks, and supportiveness and responsiveness to individual differences and students' needs. These in turn result in higher levels of students' on-task behaviour and performance (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Teachers who know their students' emotions and their emotion-related behaviour are more likely to respond to their students effectively (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Rather than using punishment or coercion to resolve students' misbehaviour for instance, effective teachers would show greater empathy and concern and help the students with their problems especially if the teachers understand the causes of the misbehaviour or difficulties (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Jennings and Greenberg (2009) argued that this approach results in better students' commitment to school, academic engagement and achievement. Conversely, teachers who lack such skills and resources tend to be 'emotionally exhausted', putting them at risk of becoming cynical, callous, and apathetic, thinking there is not much they can do or achieve and eventually withdrawing from their role including teaching tasks, or they continue to work but are unhappy (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, p. 492).

In the study school, teachers who themselves experienced and lost much in the tsunami might have caused them to be emotionally stressed or exhausted. Some were cynical, pessimistic, and apathetic toward their role at school. In other words, teachers' own stress affected their beliefs and attitudes toward their teaching practices which in the end affect the learning of young people in the school. In light of this, teachers in the study school needed support in order to be able to perform their role better including in teaching so that students could learn better. Unless teachers received the support they required, they were unlikely to be able to help themselves and provided support for others such as students. Hobfoll (1989) warned us that when people are in the position of needing support while being required to provide support to others, they are likely to experience increased psychological stress. As a result they might not be able to perform their assigned duties to their best.

3.2 Teacher-Student Instructional Relationship

In general, students' views of teachers' interaction with students were also in deficit terms. Some students perceived their teachers as not caring and not understanding of their problems. In this sense, two students who were particularly critical commented that teachers tended to reprimand students if they happened to make mistakes and exaggerated the problems including calling for parents to come to school without considering that parents might not be available when they wanted them to come to school. This situation had affected the students' participation and engagement with school and learning. One of the students commented:

"If we made a little mistake, they would taunt us with vile language, for example when we arrived late to school. Then it is not comfortable anymore. They would say unkind things. So we lose our mood and were unmotivated after that".

About a particular teacher, another student said:

"Like when I was in the first and second year. There was one particular teacher that I did not like. I did not attend the class if the teacher was there. I waited until the teacher finished the lesson, then I would enter the class. The teacher was very

cruel forcing students to buy textbooks, oppressing students, and using abusive language”.

In addition, some students in the interviews expressed their disappointment as teachers seemed to give priority to clever students over others. As when I asked one male student what he did not like about school, he said:

“The teachers...because they do not care about students...They only care about students who are clever. Those who are not clever are ignored”.

Another male student who sat at the back row in his class commented:

“That (subject) teacher never asks me whether I have understood the lesson or not. But she asks other students...other teachers are also the same. They do not ask me...They only ask those who sit in the front row”.

This particular student criticised some teachers in the school who just sat on their desk during the lesson without controlling the class to make sure that all students were doing the set tasks. He said:

“Teachers should not just sit on their desk. They should come to the back rows of the class to monitor whether or not students at the back rows are doing the tasks...If they do not do that, students at the back rows simply do not do their task...For example I do not feel like learning today because I know teachers will not even bother to come to the back row. Why should I bother to learn?”

When asked about their perception of a ‘good teacher’, understanding and care were the two most common attributes that students wanted the teachers to have to be a good teacher. In addition, a female student who did not participate in the interview but voluntarily participated in the photo activity particularly expected teachers to talk to and get to know their students. In fact, she quietly took a photo of me when I was talking to a student in the school yard during the lesson break. When I asked her why she photographed me, she said:

“I want teachers to be like you who come to students and talk to them”.

According to her, rarely did teachers approach students for a conversation outside the classroom. This was confirmed by another student in an interview who asserted:

“I just feel hesitant towards teachers. If they do not begin a conversation then I would not start. If they ask me something then I would talk to them. But rarely do teachers begin a conversation”.

Research has time and again shown that positive relationships among school personnel are among important criteria for an effective school (Cohen et al., 2009), including the importance of teacher-student relationships for a successful educational experience. In this sense, teaching and learning which involve instructional and interactional processes between and among students and teachers are among important

factors for students' social, emotional, and academic achievement (Frenzel et al., 2007, p. 478). On this note, Rimm-Kaufman and Sawyer (2004) asserted:

Teaching is an intensely psychological process and that teachers' ability to maintain productive classroom environments, motivate students, and make decisions depends on personal qualities and ability to create personal relationships with students. (Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004, p. 322)

Baker (2006) argued that a positive teacher-child relationship is associated with a range of positive school outcomes as it provides children with the emotional security necessary to fully engage in their learning activities and scaffold the development of key social, behavioural, and self-regulatory competencies needed in the school environment and school success. In contrast, according to Baker (2006), negative relationships including conflict between teachers and students, or a low degree of warmth and trust, are positively associated with poor academic and social behaviour concurrently. Birch and Ladd (1997, 1998) summarised three distinct aspects of teacher-student relationships: (1) closeness that encompasses the degree of warmth and open communication that can function as a support for young people's involvement and engagement in school, (2) dependency, which has negative connotations, refers to students' overreliance on teachers in which students become tentative in their explorations of school environment and social relationships, and (3) conflict, which acts as a stressor, can impair students' successful adjustment, academic performance and achievement because conflict between teacher and student can foster feelings of anger, anxiety, and alienation in students, and thus they withdraw from the school arena.

It is important to keep in mind that any issue that arises, as well as its solutions within the school including in the context of students' school experience, are not merely about individual students (Murray-Harvey, 2010). An important message for schools and teachers is to not simply blame students alone along with their families as a sole source of problems arising at school rather than to view students' problems including in their adjustment and achievement as a systemic and an inter-relationship that involves teachers, peers, and families (Murray-Harvey, 2010). Focusing on relationships that build social-emotional competence is beneficial for both young people's lives and academic outcomes since teachers' "explicit and tacit judgments" toward students affect students' feelings about their school, academic motivation and achievement (Murray-Harvey, 2010). With this in mind, it is important that teachers pay attention to the importance of their relationships with their students, particularly in 'instructional' related relationships as the ways teachers manage their classrooms, interact with students including modelling behaviours and providing feedback to students and fostering effective learning are influenced by their relationships (Murray-Harvey, 2010).

Students, like in the study school with high levels of behavioural issues after the tsunami as perceived by their teachers, were actually in the greatest need of positive relationships with their teachers (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). In the light of this, research suggests that teachers in the study school who themselves were affected by the tsunami and stressed can be emotionally stressed including in dealing with students especially with misbehaving ones. They could be less likely to develop positive relationships with their students and they tended to be less involved, less tolerant, and less caring (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). On the other hand, it is noted in the literature

when students experience ‘conflictual’ relationships with their teachers, they are more likely to exhibit anti-social behaviour at school (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, p. 502) and experience negative student outcomes such as school avoidance, classroom disengagement, and poor academic performance (Birch & Ladd, 1998).

4. CONCLUSION

Findings from the study provided evidence that the tsunami created teaching learning challenges for both teachers and students in the study school. Students in particular viewed their teachers in negative terms. Students’ deficit views of their teachers were prominent especially about teachers’ pedagogical practices and their interactions with students in the school, causing their learning difficulties in the school.

It has been noted in the literature that having quality teachers’ teaching practice and positive teacher-student relationships are critical for a successful educational experience for young people. Although teachers have a role to provide young people with opportunities to thrive through their learning experience that happened in school (Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2010), teachers’ and students’ experiences of the tragedy tsunami including stress and their loss in the tragedy might create challenges for the teachers in performing their job as educators and students as learners. Notably, students in the study did not enjoy the process of teaching and learning causing issues between teachers’ and students’ interactions during the lessons. Teaching and learning in the study school was seen as a traditional pedagogy, in which teachers lectured in front of the classrooms or wrote the lessons on the blackboard for students to copy. It was a typical of pedagogy that gives room for students to be detached and uninvolved in their learning (Bartholomaeus, 2000).

Research suggests the importance of positive student-teacher relationships. However, students who were affected by the tsunami may exhibit behavioural issues due to their experience of the tragedy, loss, stress, trauma and death of parents causing issues in their interaction with others including teachers. Misbehaving students may experience problems in their instructional relationships especially with teachers, reducing the opportunities for positive social engagement, classroom participation and supportive instruction and feedback. The interactions between students and teachers are what Bronfenbrenner (1994) calls a “bi-directional influence” (Paquette & Ryan, 2001) in which students affect the belief and behaviour of teachers while teachers also influence the behaviour and belief of their students. Similarly, “teachers feel more efficacious when their students do well, and students do well when teachers feel more efficacious” (Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004, p. 322).

Voices of students in this study have provided opportunities for better understanding of challenges of young people’s learning at schools that extends the current literature that focuses on the perceptions and understandings of adults. Thus, this should result in better assistance and support for young people to achieve success at school.

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